2958516
ILLINOIS DOCUMENTS
APR 8 1977
ILLINOIS STATE LIBRARY

CHILDREN DISCOVER DEATH

I640.715
HEE-3771
no.31
c.3

of special interest to parents of preschool and grade-school children

CHATS with PARENTS

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
3 0112 121925967

Number 31

CHILDREN DISCOVER DEATH

Dear Parents:

Why doesn't our dog get up?
What is "dead"?
Do only old people die?
When will I die?

The death of a pet, a dead bird in the street, a "squished" bug, or the death of a family member start children on discoveries about death. By the age of five most children have had some contact with death. Curisoity is sparked and they ask questions. But, they may catch us by surprise with their directness and demand for physical details.

Many times children's questions go unanswered or are only partially answered. We may draw back, thinking to protect the child's security. We postpone providing facts "until they're older." We give them half-truths. We hope they will drop the subject. Children are left with their "make-believe ideas," their fears of the unknown, and their unanswered questions.

The silence children often find in response to their questions about death has at least three reasons behind it: (1) parents have their own emotional concern

based upon past experiences with death or the fear of emotional losses; (2) parents feel uncertain about what to say or where to begin; or (3) the impact of an actual death upon an anxious parent limits efforts in trying to explain what has happened to a frightened child.

Age Differences in Understandings

Children's understandings of death develop according to how their minds work at different ages. Let's consider differences in how children at various ages look at what causes living things to die:

Ages	Causes of Death
Under 6 or 7	Imagined cause - "eating a dirty bug"
7 to 11	More specific - cancer, dope, guns, poison, etc.
12 and over	More abstract and general - illness, old age, accident, etc.

Children under 6 or 7, also tend to have a more self-centered concern about death (What about me?) and a lack of understanding about the irreversible nature of death (Will Grandfather come back in the Spring?).

Importance of Listening

Very young children (under 6 or 7) cannot usually learn from the experiences of others. They are likely to react in terms of their own experiences, what they have been told by adults, or what they have seen on television.

It is easy to read into a child's questions much more than is being asked. The question, "Why did my cat die?" is likely to be asking for a simple answer such as, "He was hit by a car."

Often such questions as, "Could it happen to me?" "Who will take care of me?" "What if I get very sick?" are not asked directly, but are the ones children want most to have answered. The real key is to answer the question that is intended whether it is spoken or not. Watch how children act as well as listen to what they are asking. They need reassurance that they will be safe.

Questions become more direct, open, and even morbid after the age of seven. If children have adults near by who will listen and answer questions carefully, they are likely to have a strong desire to talk over the many different ideas they have about death. They seem to want to know all they can.

How Parents Can Prepare Children

1. Take advantage of the events which happen around children when little emotion is connected to an experience of death, such as the killing of a bug, driving past a funeral procession, or visiting a cemetery. Discuss death when people die who they know but are not emotionally close to. Talk over the differences in what is "alive," "not alive" or "dead." Compare funeral or burial practices and religious beliefs about death. Compare "yesterday's" ideas with "today's." Discuss death as it is shown on television. This is a "thinking" approach to help clarify understandings of death.

2. The "feeling" approach brings children closer to more acute situations. People can create a warm and helpful climate for talking about feeling sad, angry or lonely; missing others; or remembering those who have died. A sudden event such as the death of a pet, a relative, or a classmate that upsets a family can be shared as family members tell how they feel. They can talk over both minor or major tragedies of death that come to their attention. These might be the outgrowth of news reports or a neighborhood happening.

ILLINOIS STATE LIBRARY

When Death Is Within the Family

If children are completely unaware of the possibility of a pending death, the greater the shock at the time of death. Children need help in dealing with personal fears and anxieties rather than help in being shielded from the effects of a long illness. Sending a child away should be avoided if possible. To do that would mean losing not only a parent or other close relative, but also a neighborhood, friendly teachers, and for all practical purposes, the other parent and close relatives. This is almost too much for a child to be expected to bear.

Instead, children can be helped before and after death in gentle, loving ways by (1) including them in the family's "circle of grief," helping them talk about feelings of loss; (2) recognizing emotions such as fear or guilt which need to be dealt with; (3) talking about the sick or absent person including both happy things and not-so-happy things; (4) trying not to be shocked by the questions asked; (5) sharing your own wonder, faith, and hope; and (6) giving a realistic view of what the death means in terms of necessary changes in the family's way of living (income, money, household help, etc.)

A single thought is of utmost importance when children come in

close contact with death. Talking about death is more important and possibly beneficial than not talking about it. Parents can express the naturalness of feeling sad and missing others. They can share how we remember others by keeping a part of them alive inside our heads and hearts. In helping their children discover the realities of death and healthful ways for expressing emotions, parents are contributing to their children's future abilities for meeting many of life's crises.

Sincerely,

Beatrice H. Bagby

Mrs. Beatrice H. Bagby
Child and Family Specialist

_____
County Extension Adviser

The Illinois Cooperative Extension Service provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

(State/County/Local Groups/United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating)

Cooperative Extension Service
United States Department of Agriculture
University of Illinois
At Urbana-Champaign
Urbana, Illinois 61801

Official Business
Penalty for private use, $300

HEE 3771 2/77 16,000

POSTAGE AND FEES PAID
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE
AGR 101